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Israel Overstates Arms' Success, Say Some in CIA

A faction in the CIA, admittedly a minority, believes that the Israelis are setting the stage for a preemptive attack on Syria. In their view, this would explain Israel's repeated scare statements about Syrian missiles and other supposed indications of warlike intentions by the Syrians.

One secret analysis charges that the Israelis deliberately exaggerated the success of their weapons last year against the Syrians' Soviet equipment. If this is true, the question is: why?

One example is the press report, allegedly dependent on Israeli military sources, that touted the Israelis as having a great new antitank weapon that cut through the Soviets' top-of-the-line T72 tank like so much butter. But several Pentagon sources late last year began disputing the existence of any radically new antitank weapon.

These sources suggested that the Israelis owed their success against the Syrians in tank battles in Lebanon not to some magical new weapon but simply to the Israelis' superior training, tactics and electronic warfare weapons.

The secret minority opinion by the CIA skeptics contended, for example, that "close examination of the fractures"—the damage that disabled Syrian tanks—"reveal that they were probably not the result of indirect fire."

The big question, of course, is why the Israelis want to make their victories over the Syrians' Soviet weapons seem even more spectacular than they were.

The secret CIA minority opinion, shown to my associates Ron McRae and Dale Van Atta, suggests that puffing up the value of Israeli technology puts Jerusalem in a better bargaining position with the United States, which presumably would welcome any evidence that Soviet weaponry is beatable.

On a more devious level, the maverick CIA analysts suggest that, by hyping their military superiority over the Syrians, the Israelis hoped to sucker the Kremlin into supplying Syria with higher-grade Soviet weapons. This would give Israel justification for putting pressure on the United States to counter the Soviet effort.

Of course, this is what has happened, though there's no evidence it was an Israeli plot. The Soviets, appalled at the failure of their weaponry in Lebanon, have sent Syria sophisticated SA5 surface-to-air missiles with hundreds of Soviet tech-

nicians to man them. That gives Israel a potent argument for more American military aid.

But oddly, the Israelis have had little to say about a Soviet weapon that should be of genuine concern: the "Scud" surface-to-surface missile. The Scud is said to have a range of about 180 miles and could cover almost all of Israel from southern Syria.

According to the CIA skeptics, it's almost as if the Israelis don't want to let the Syrians know what really bothers them. Instead, Jerusalem is focusing on the SA5, which is less dangerous to Israel, but more valuable as a political "weapon" to use on the Reagan administration.